

LEADERSHIP AND THE RLI

ROTARY INSTITUTE FOR ZONES 6B, 7A & 10B

GRAND HYATT HOTEL, BALI, INDONESIA, DECEMBER 2011

It is a great pleasure for Penny and me to be with you at this wonderful Rotary Institute convened by my friend, Trustee and Past R.I. Director Jackson Hsieh. The Rotarians and RLI leaders in these zones are exceptional and are a great credit to Rotary International.

I would like to talk to you today about leadership in general and the state of RLI in the Rotary world.

If you read the newspapers and other media, you may be convinced that there is a "leadership crisis" in the world. Scholars at great universities, many business groups, journalists, political leaders, non-profit organizations and just about everyone seem to think that we need better leadership in business, government, and just about everywhere. As a result of this thinking, colleges and other educational institutions are conducting leadership courses and conferences, authors are turning out many, many books on leadership all the time and newspapers use the word "leadership" very often in their publications. While individual leaders have always been criticized, you would not have had all this talk of a leadership crisis 20 years ago.

Especially interesting lately were the commentaries by many newspapers and others that the death recently of Steve Jobs, the leader of the Apple Corporation, would weaken the future success of Apple, one of the largest and most successful corporations in the world. The same was said when Edwin Land (inventor of the Polaroid camera) and Walt Disney died. How is it that the death of an effective corporate leader would spell doom for their companies? Aren't there hundreds of leaders capable of effective leadership already within each company today?

You wouldn't think so with the rush to hire a small group of outside leaders to succeed a CEO or president in the business world.

Is there a crisis of leadership? A respected professor at the Harvard Business School thought so and wrote an article even critical of his own school for turning out technocrats, but not developing visionary leaders for business companies. One thing the world has learned over the years is that there is a big difference between a leader and a manager. The manager keeps the business/organization going smoothly and the leader provides the creative and visionary path for the business. The experts say that real change comes from a good leader rather than from one who functions as a manager.

What the Harvard professor really said was that creativity is a very, if not the most important quality of a real leader.

Last week, I happened to read a newspaper report of the death of a school principal who had been hired to lead an underperforming school in Boston. The students came from poor families and many did not have English as their first language.

When the principal arrived, she was faced with tremendous obstacles: terrible grades on standardized tests, disorder in the classrooms, lack of parental support, low attendance rates and much more. Somehow she managed to turn the school completely around to become one of the best schools of its type in Boston.

She did this with the same students, the same teachers, the same books and materials and the same budget. To me that was a great example of the effect of creative leadership. By her force of personality, her people skills and her tenacity, she was able to do what principals in other underperforming schools in Boston were supposed to do, but could not. And she did it while at the same time forming warm friendships with the students.

Let's take a look at leadership in a large voluntary organization.

One of the problems with a large voluntary organization is the rapid turnover of local voluntary leadership. **Every** year Rotary has 34,000 new club presidents, 530 new district governors and half of the board of directors are new. A Rotary International President serves just one year. Except for a few large clubs or districts that have administrative or secretarial support, Rotary Clubs have all volunteer leadership. The quality of that voluntary leadership determines the success of the club or district.

What should we do about this massive turnover of leadership each year? It seems to me that we have two major choices. First we can ask each club president and district governor to serve for five years. Is anyone here willing to serve five years as a club president or district governor? If so, please stand up.

The most practical solution is to provide our future leaders with the very best Rotary education we can so that we have a constant supply of knowledgeable and well prepared Rotary leaders ready to step in and be club presidents and district governors on day one.

As many Rotary leaders have pointed out, when you see a weak club, you invariably see a weak president and when you see a strong club you invariably see a strong president.

Another problem of leadership in our clubs is the difficulty many Rotarians have in learning about the wonderful world of Rotary outside of the individual club. For those many of you who have attended a PETS session, you may agree with me that many, if not most of the presidents-elect at these sessions really know very little about the world of Rotary outside of their own clubs.

In our busy world with all sorts of economic and other problems for business people, the tendency of many clubs is just to do what they did the year before. Creativity takes a back seat to the pressures of the day.

A fourth problem (of many) is that the average Rotarian, when asked to be in a leadership position, rarely thinks about the leadership skills he or she will need in such a position. With all the research today in leadership skills, a Rotarian can learn and begin thinking about how to lead a Rotary club effectively. RLI joins those who believe that people can learn to improve their leadership skills and helps many to do just that.

What is really the goal of a RLI course session? While having the world of Rotary opened to the Rotarian and discussing strategies for leadership are very important, the overriding goal of a RLI course is for the Rotarian to become "enthusiastic" about Rotary. When Rotarians learn of the unbelievable service projects around the world, Rotary's relationship with the United Nations and other important agencies and see that Rotary takes on the most difficult and serious problems of the world, they really become enthusiastic. An enthusiastic Rotarian will always learn more about Rotary, one way or the other.

Whether a natural leader or not, an enthusiastic leader can do wonders with a Rotary Club. That reminds me of an experience we had in a RLI course session in New Jersey. I happened to sit in a class led by a recent past governor who was a friend of mine. I was disappointed that he did not follow the things we taught to discussion leaders and made many mistakes (at least we thought they were mistakes). BUT when I read the evaluation forms the participants in that class filled out, I was astounded to see that the evaluations were nearly perfect in praising his performance. After thinking about it and watching him, I began to realize that the mistakes didn't really matter because he was so enthusiastic about Rotary.

So now I tell our discussion leaders that if they are going to make mistakes in our methods and do things wrong, just do them enthusiastically.

Some people seem to think that leadership in a non-profit charitable organization like Rotary is much easier than leadership in a business organization. John C. Maxwell in his great book, "The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership", wrote of the leverage that business leaders have, such as salaries, perks, promotions, ability to fire an employee, etc. that do not exist in a voluntary organization. Said Maxwell,

"But in voluntary organizations, the only thing that works is leadership in its purest form." Speaking to a meeting of business leaders, Maxwell gave them some advice - "If you are a business person and you really want to find

out whether your people are capable of leading, send them out to volunteer their time in the community. If they can get people to follow them while they're serving at...a community organization (perhaps like a Rotary Club...), "then you know that they really do have influence –and leadership ability."

Perhaps we ought to tell our business leaders about that statement and suggest they send some of their executives to join Rotary Clubs.

RLI, today has 300 member districts that cover 168 countries and geographical areas in every continent. Many thousands of Rotarians are attending RLI courses every year, both the three Part basic course and the graduate seminars for those completing the basic course. Thousands of RLI faculty members and division officers have the opportunity to work on a Rotary activity outside their own clubs and districts when R.I. positions for past governors have decreased.

The grassroots approach of RLI has been successful because RLI leaders around the world gain ownership of the program and want it to succeed. It is purely voluntary and no one is imposing the program on them.

Recently, PRIVP Monty Audenart of Canada, the Chair of the Rotary International Membership and Retention Committee, has been telling Rotarians that RLI is the best retention program that we have in Rotary.

At one of our courses, a new Rotarian told the discussion leader that attending the RLI course was the second major life-changing experience in his life. I wonder what the first one was.

Some of you may remember the talk by Nobel Laureate Wangari Matthai of Kenya at the Chicago Convention. She died recently and it reminded me of her story about a little hummingbird.

"A fire is raging in the forest,

All the animals leave the forest out of fear, except for the little hummingbird;

The hummingbird flies to the river, takes one drop of water in his beak, returns to the forest and drops the water on the fire;

The little hummingbird does this over and over, flying to the river, taking one drop of water in his beak, flying back to the forest and dropping it on the fire, while the other animals watch and laugh;

The animals ask the hummingbird, why are you doing this with just one drop of water on a raging fire?

The hummingbird without stopping his work, answered, "I'm doing all I can."

My friends, the effectiveness of Rotary rises or falls in our Rotary CLUBS. No other part of Rotary is as important as our Clubs where Rotary service is performed. As the R.I. Strategic Plan so aptly states, supporting and strengthening Rotary Clubs is the first goal.

Rotary is arguably the finest voluntary organization of business and professional people in the world. But imagine how much more service we could provide and how much more we could do to improve the quality of life in the communities of the world if ALL of our clubs were strong with creative and visionary leadership and with Rotarians, like the hummingbird, who do everything they can.

I believe that there is a truly bright future for Rotary and as Past R.I. President Richard King always says, that the greatest days for Rotary lie ahead.

May God Bless you all.

David Linet